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The Anti-Capitalist Case for Standards

In a capitalist world, the often-overlooked systems of technical standards offer a rare example of economic collaboration that prioritizes the public good over profit.

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"It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism," the saying goes. Indeed, as climate disasters intensify, liberal democracies crumble, and economic instability deepens, visions of collapse seem far more tangible than those of a post-capitalist future.

Part of the reason it is so difficult to imagine an end to capitalism is that it's embedded in nearly every aspect of modern life, from how we produce goods to how we share knowledge. But it doesn't have to be that way. In fact, an anti-capitalist — or at least a non-capitalist — mode of knowledge production has been hiding in plain sight all along.

Consider technical standards — the often invisible rules that ensure everything from electrical outlets to internet protocols function seamlessly. These standards don't just appear by chance; they're created and maintained by standards-developing organizations (SDOs) like ISO, ANSI, and IEEE. The way these SDOs operate — through open collaboration, consensus-building, and public knowledge-sharing — offer a rare example of an economic system that does not depend on capitalism to function.

In fact, the formal process insisted upon by most SDOs is designed to address and limit the power of companies in a capitalist system to control the system itself. In the U.S., it is easy to come up with examples of technical standards that were arrived at outside of the SDO process. PDF became a standard document distribution format due to Adobe leveraging its power early in the development of desktop publishing to ensure their format was used everywhere. USB became the somewhat confusing standard both for several connector types and data transfer protocols

because a consortium of hardware and telecom vendors leveraged their combined power to develop the One Port to Rule Them All. The formal process used by SDOs attempts to minimize this outsize influence through requirements that significantly decrease the amount of power that any single player can have in the development of a modern standard.

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Notably, most SDOs are non-profits, or the local equivalent. SDOs were founded in Europe and North America in the 50 years spanning the turn of the 20th century for the express purpose of developing procedures for manufacturing precision devices, and, in the words of King George V at the founding of the National Physical Laboratory, "to bring scientific knowledge to bear practically upon our everyday industrial and commercial life."

Maybe it was the obsessive focus of the Second Industrial Revolution on material technology that led these early standardizers to focus on manufacturing rather than capital. But due to whatever historical accident, they built a system that prioritizes the thing being standardized, rather than how that thing can be exploited by capital. The project of standardization and the founding of SDOs was tied to economic development and promoting manufacturing of material technologies. What we do not see, from even the most enthusiastic promoters of standardization, is the argument that standardization is for the benefit of capital. Even Henry Ford wrote that the purpose of standardization is to improve "the economies of making," surely understanding that profits follow from that.

ANSI (American National Standards Institute), for example, has several requirements for "due process" that are designed to directly offset financial or political power. These range from Openness ("there shall be no undue financial barriers to participation") to Lack of Dominance and Balance ("… shall not be dominated by any single interest category, individual or

organization" and "…process should have a balance of interests."). Even the actual methodology of decision-making is, in its way, anti-capitalist, as the goal is always consensus and not majority rule. ANSI states flat out that the "U.S. standards system promotes the public good, elevates national health and safety, drives innovation and U.S. competitiveness, and contributes to a fairer and more liberalized global trading system." Note that the public good comes first in this list. It is truly a situation where everyone must give a little in order to approach a true common good.

Unlike patents, which are owned, licensed, bought, and sold, standards are developed collaboratively and published by SDOs on "reasonable and non-discriminatory" terms, ensuring that they are widely available. Even Friedrich Hayek, in "The Use of Knowledge in Society," practically the ur-text of free market fundamentalism, notes that the free market needs a process by which knowledge is constantly communicated and acquired.

To be sure, international standards are good for trade and commerce. The ISO (International Organization for Standardization) has even developed a case study methodology to assess the economic benefits of standards to corporate value creation. (Spoilers: It's a very large ROI.) It would be difficult to say with a straight face that the international standards system is truly *anti*-capitalist. But the international standards system is just as readily able to accommodate any other economic system that relies on manufacturing, technological innovation, and trade. And what nation in the modern world does not fit this description? Even North Korea has its standards-developing process and SDOs. Indeed, North Korea is a member of most international SDOs, including the ISO and WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization).

And so we return to where we started: the difficulty of imagining an end to capitalism. We do not claim to have a solution to that particular problem, and anyway many others have written about that. But whatever the nature of that problem is, it is exacerbated by the fact that we have a collective blind spot in not noticing that one of the most critical systems on which the modern world is built, has little inherently to do with capitalism at all. Information sharing for free or nearly free, in the service of the public good. Few things seem less consistent with the modern capitalist economy. Yet a system based on precisely these two premises is baked into the global economy.

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Anti-capitalism does not mean anti-technology or anti-trade; it means building a society based on an economic basis other than capitalism. Non-capitalist societies in the modern world also possess technology, conduct trade, and experience material progress — mechanisms that are built into the standards development system. It's just that how decisions get made about that progress and who owns and benefits from the fruits of that progress is different than in a capitalist society.

We therefore suggest that one of the most pragmatic anti-capitalist things that one can do is to push for any organizations that you might be involved with to participate in the standards development process. Encouraging organizations within a capitalist system to participate in a process that rests on openness, consensus, and lack of dominance erodes the power of that very system. It ensures that information — which, as we know, is power — is a public good.

It is not necessary to bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old. One of the tools for building the new world has been here all along.

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